

Interview for Pride Magazine 149

[London, December 2000]

Ever wondered why Spike Lee or John Singleton don't seem to have any female counterparts? By the time director Winta Yohannes asked herself this question, she'd already decided the filmmaker's life was hers for the taking. „I think it was always pretty obvious that I would do something visual, even when I was younger - my mum used to take the TV lead with her to work so I wouldn't stay in and watch afternoon martinées when I could be out playing instead. But I wasn't one of those people who tells the world they're going to be a director when they're 15.“



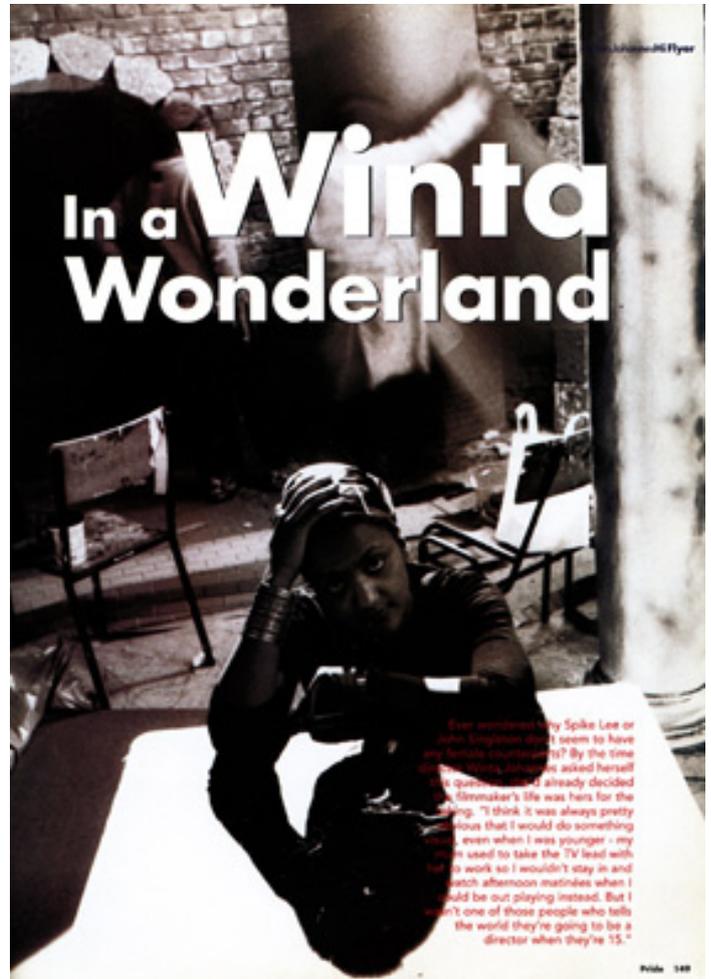
WintaYohannesHiFlyer

With a set of influences grabbed magpie-style from various ports of call, Winta's always on the go: bursting into a meeting with armfuls of retroish showcards featuring the Pucci'd-up elegance of an Afro-topped model, mobile phone on the buzz, she's one of a handful of young black female film-makers producing work in Britain today. „Honestly, I have no idea why there aren't more of us, especially when it's now so easy to make a start, with a cheap camera and a decent editing programme on your personal computer,“ she encourages. It helps, of course, to have interesting stories to tell, starting with her own. Born in Eritrea 26 years ago, Winta started globe-hopping as a toddler after war with Ethiopia forced her family into exile first in Manchester, then in Cologne. She settled there with her mother, a Horn of Africa charities controller, and stuck out school in a German ‚gymnasium‘. „Making a film is always going to be a challenge but I didn't find that difficult. It's an organic process and a hate/love relationship, but it suits me because it's creative, flexible and never has a fixed schedule,“ she explains.

At 20, film-making became her solution to fulfilling a load of creative potential when she decamped to Harlem and began working with a black film-makers' collective there, gathering enough contacts, momentum and work experience to win a place at the prestigious London International Film School at 24. „ It's still amazing to me how different the drive is in each place. In America, people expect you to tell them about yourself and work, expect you to call them when they hand you a business card. In Britain, things are a little less open.“ So Winta's taken to the festival

circuit to get people talking; this year's Bite the Mango festival for black and Asian films screened her two most recent shorts, Blues Is My Middle Name (1999) and Cherish (2000) to vast critical acclaim. And that's always a good thing when you've got a feature in development and a unique take on life's expectations from time spent shackled up all over the world.

Blues Is My Middle Name tracks a couple's stresses on the early '60s London jazz circuit, while Cherish plumbs autobiographical experience to tell the story of a teenager whose father surprises her with a visit. Problem is, she's never met him before. „Cherish was definitely inspired by my own meeting with my father when I was 18, but as I began making it, I kept finding lots of other people I met had been through similar events - where this absent father who only lives in your head is suddenly a dinner guest,“ laughs Winta. She admits that since her name means,



desire' in Eritrean, she found the prodigal dad myth distressingly easy to buy into. „I really wanted to show, in not much time , how this separation causes both sides to romanticise the other - Cherish is forced to see that this fantasy she had about her parents being in love and torn apart by war isn't real, so that calls up all sorts of questions about what love is, compared to what we expect it to be.“ Bursting into life with assistance from the opening bars of LL Cool J's Going Back to Cali, the film's modern approach and calm cinematography mesh to create a vivid portrait.

Winta's next challenge - beyond finishing her demanding course - is the completion of her first feature. „ I'm writing, looking for financing and just trying to enjoy the process while it's happening. Making the shorts has helped me to reach an audience that likes and understands what I'm doing. And, yeah, I'm a black film-maker but different places you go put different labels on who you are. Once when I was an exchange student, when I went to American high school in West Virginia, this guy came up to me when I was at my locker and he was looking at me funny. So I asked him why, and all he said was, „I'm the other German. I could tell who you were because of your style.“